

Contemporary Architecture in Collision

Dr. Wagih Fawzi Youssef

Abstract

The only reality of architecture is in the personality of the architect. The architect neither creates nor invents but obeys a profound law of reality and can discover within himself this to the extent that he divests himself of everything in him that is conventional and that is a sentimental habit. Architecture is science humanized and the cause of its decline is separation from science, practice and experience. Architecture must include all the scientific, religious, moral and utilitarian motives which the architect has held in the moment of his creation and to which he has given a form, enriched with a complete humanity.

The greatness of true architecture is to discover, to grasp again, to make us know this reality far from the one in which we live, from which we are separated further and further, as the conventional knowledge which we have substituted for it assumes greater thickness and vulnerability. It is the experience of contemporary architecture that teaches us to see the architecture of the past and not the reverse, because this experience sums up and justifies in itself the experience of the architecture of the past. This is as valid for architecture as it is for philosophy; all the history of civilization lives in today's thought. If the contemporary critic has acquired that quality that makes a work of architecture, he will be able to recognize it in any work, irrespective of the taste in which it was executed.

Keywords: *logical consistency, neo-primitivism, asymmetry, anti-traditionalism, authentic feeling, intuitive experience*

Introduction

Scholars of architecture are never able to grasp architecture in the process of becoming and are better acquainted with the works of the past than with contemporary architecture. Too often they consider the activity that surrounds them merely decadent, and this prevents them from understanding eternal human creativity. Sympathy for past cultures can be rational but it cannot identify with the passion for art. Moreover such sympathies often lead the architectural critic to judge the architecture of his own time by the standards of the past and therefore to misunderstand that which is original and authentic in contemporary design, or worse, to confuse the imitating of traditional schemes with creativity. Interestingly, this attitude may also mean that the architecture of the past is not understood, since it is not seen in terms of its creativity but in terms of its cultural schemes that belong to taste, not to architecture. Neither the present nor the past can be understood in this way.

The experience of the architect created a vital awareness of contemporary architecture which could not have been achieved without the ideas of idealistic aesthetics. It is the experience of contemporary architecture that teaches us to see the architecture of the past and not the reverse, because this experience sums up and justifies in itself the experience of the architecture of the past. This is as valid for architecture as it is for philosophy; all the history of civilization lives in today's thought.

It is impossible to come to know Egyptian taste if one is not able to find one's way in contemporary taste. This will end up by misunderstanding both Egyptian and contemporary architecture. All attempts to make the concept of ancient Egyptian architecture into a measure of excellence to be applied to the architecture of all other periods will fail and become devoid of authentic feeling for architecture.

Architectural Creativity

The architect neither creates nor invents but obeys a profound law of reality and can discover within himself this to the extent that he divests himself of everything in him that is conventional and that is a sentimental habit. The architect confronting a contemporary work of architecture does not have recourse to established well-defined criteria and authoritative tradition. The ability practiced in evaluating the past is then revealed for what it is: empty and devoid of spiritual content. Inevitably, the critic shows partiality in what he selects or rejects. Out of this arises the impassioned character of every living critic. Only that passion that judges according to abstract principles and not out of the spontaneous love of the creative act should be avoided. If the critic has acquired that force that makes a work of architecture, he will be able to recognize it in any work, irrespective of the taste in which it was executed.

21st Century criticism has emphasized the study of methods used in the treatment of form and color. At times this study has degenerated to a mere appreciation of abstract form, forgetting the unity of form and motif, and at other times distracted criticism from the architect's personality as in the case of the evident progress in the knowledge of form and color. Since the architect's soul is not expressed by means of forms and colors but in forms and colors, the experience has not passed through and been completely transformed into values of form and space. The creativity of form and space is the unique harmony on which to judge architectural creativity which cannot be isolated from life. Imagination is not exhausted in creativity but participates in the life of its own times by either adhering to or rebelling against it. Architecture transcends history while participating in it. Thus it is impossible to critically see an architect's creativity without a complete knowledge of his historical environment.

The critical history of architecture differs from traditional architectural history in the greater emphasis placed on its critical function and in the pre-eminence given to critical

activity. Its central concern is the personality of the architect, which is distinct from the personality of the layman because it encompasses the moment at which the architect's creative imagination is realized in form and function.

Cultural Interpretation

The style or form of any architectural work indicates the ideas current in the time and place in which it was designed. Without considering the environment of the building one cannot experience its meaning and purpose and probably miss its way of creation, because it gave no encouragement to cultural interpretation. A work of architecture requires one to go beyond the pleasure of the eyes to understand the reason for what he sees, and to discover the various qualities it contains.

Up to the beginning of last century taste in architecture did not keep up with the rapid changes in painting and the forms of the Renaissance were repeated in a mechanical manner as a revolt against tradition. The principles of the new taste are based on the correspondence between form and function and the organic interrelations of the forms. The cubist pioneers of architecture endeavored to discover in the forms of old art and especially in Romanesque and Gothic works, a basic law of rhythm that has validity as a fundamental perception of reality to integrate cubism into the historical continuity.

After having deprived classical form of its historical justification, the recognition of an absolute theoretical value of classical form emerged as a radical anti-classical stand. Sensations took first place and a classical value once again became the ideal of design but it was achieved by means of a new sensibility. The ascendancy of sensation became a guide in judging both old and modern pioneers of architecture. Now all the energies are concentrated on solving the Cubist dualism which is expressed in purely geometric terms; the concept of surface or plane and the concept of depth or volume. In actuality this dualism is resolved in critical observation, since surface cannot be excluded in favor of depth or volume in favor of plane. This attitude reveals the ambiguity and formal newness without irremediably impairing tradition, and in a reality that strives to fulfill itself without wholly negating the value of natural appearances and of emotions.

Cubism

The architect Antonio Sant'Elia and Boccioni expressed their criticism upon Cubism as being static and dealing with objects insisting that Futurism was an art that no longer revolved around objects but around a state of mind. They spoke of synthesis of empirical facts. When Boccioni said that a moving horse is not a stationary horse that is moving but a completely different thing, that is one physical fact for another. However, the concept of simultaneity, instead of becoming a synthesis, only too readily deteriorated into the concept of speed. From this stems the myth of the machine age, the actual rather

than stylistic anti-traditionalism, and the rapid deterioration of aesthetic controversy into more political arguments.

Another thought concerned with research into the fundamental laws of proportions of the structural norms of forms that have been obscured since the Renaissance. Here the antithesis is no longer between Middle Ages and Renaissance but between an architecture that is truth and an architecture that is illusion, an architecture that rests on the ancient wisdom of tradition and architecture that turns to invention and dramatic effect. Architecture is science humanized and the cause of its decline is separation from science, practice and experience.

The architect's purpose is to reconstruct the universe according to the laws that govern it. It is at this point that architecture that began with cubism is transformed into a useless neo-primitivism, or neo-classicism that is anti-traditionalism. Thus a distinction has to be made between Cubism and the movements and trends that appear in Europe architecture after 1930's. Cubism has created a visual language that rapidly replaced the naturalistic idiom that had been the language of architecture until then.

In fact physical Cubism went towards abstraction. Early Cubists made use of fragments of natural forms though combined in ways dictated by their inner selves: forms stemming from the depths of their internal consciousness, unrelated to any visual experience. Thus architecture became the message of a hidden and more real world but one beyond the reach of reason. The greatness of true architecture is to discover, to grasp again, to make us know this reality far from the one in which we live, from which we are separated further and further as the conventional knowledge which we have substituted for it assumes greater thickness and in vulnerability. We are in danger before we experience the reality of our life, the real life. This life that lives every instant in every man, as well as in the architect. This is by showing the close relation that links the real and the imaginary to define the distinction between the subjective and the imaginary and to establish a link between the unconnected worlds of waking and sleeping, of exterior and interior reality of reason and madness of the calm of consciousness and love, of life and revolution.

The Value of Architecture

A work of architecture participates in values. The value of architecture lies beyond the representation of an active principle that guarantees that the sign survives the thing signified. Instead, it lies in the recognition of this survival, or in the eternal know-ness and activity of the sign long after the object has been destroyed. This is governed by an absence of contradiction, by a facility of emotive reversals caused by repressions, by timelessness, and by the substitution for exterior reality of a psychic reality ruled only by the pleasure principle. Automatism is the direct road to that region. Architects rejected

the subjection to pure form and wanted to rediscover the spirit that had produced it and to assert the value of tradition that is continuously growing. This is not a reactionary movement but the restitution of the content of experience and of an active function to consciousness related to the periphery and to experiment with mechanical processes. Therefore the new movement is a projection to the world, often with intense and at times with dramatic social awareness.

The actual objects presented to the architect's vision are reduced to pure elements of space and volume. In this abstract world these elements are perfectly coordinated and organized by the architect's sensual intelligence, they attain logical consistency. These abstractions are then brought back into the concrete world of real things, not by giving them back their specific peculiarities, but by expressing them in an incessantly varying and shifting texture. Where his taste dominates, and not theories that lack the necessary philosophical background, the architect is led into ambiguities and contradictions without perceiving the absorption of the concept of beautiful into the concept of architecture, one of the most important achievements of aesthetics which is essential to an understanding of contemporary architecture. The architect is not able to find a justification in modern psychology for the concept that architecture is a perceptual and intellectual activity tending to formulate absolute and ideal types on which he feels the value of contemporary architecture is based.

The work of architecture must have a vitality of its own. The desire for a form is connected with asymmetry, and must have a vitality of its own independent of the object it may represent. The architect should have the solid shape, as it were inside his head whatever its size as if he were holding it in the hollow of his hand, because he visualizes his work in this way, he realizes its volume as the space the shape displaces in the air. The architect must resolve conflicts, organize memories. The form must be felt as pure, solid form not a description of reminiscences. For this reason form is outside of history and is pure presence. It becomes apparent that a complex form cannot be defined this way since it has to be assembled in a composite process. In contrast to the composite or constructed form, the elementary form is organic and shaped according to internal laws assembled from reality, concrete and profoundly realistic. This theory of abstract form as absolute reality supersedes the ambiguities of Cubist theory and its dialectical predicament of being caught in a continuous contrast with representational form. Form as the absolute presence is not realized with immediacy in the Impressionist sense but is form that realizes the spirit in its immediacy. Hence abstract form has been absorbed by the theory of empirical experience of the Impressionists.

A New Barbarity

The Industrial Revolution produced two problems, the crisis in handicrafts and the adjustments required by the tremendous population increases in the cities. The Industrial

Revolution is responsible for the destruction of traditions of craftsmanship and the rapid progress toward a new barbarity and supported a return to the handicraft community by arguments and direct action. John Ruskin felt that architecture was essentially ornamental, Adolf Loos felt the opposite and became the exponent of a simplified unornamented architecture, expressing only its practical function. Architects are dealing with the unity of structure and decoration. The common enemy was academic architecture imitating historical styles. Other architects proclaimed the need for unity of structure and decoration and extolled the possibilities inherent in the new methods of construction for the use of space and saw space as the dimension of the furbish life of the machine age on condition to have beauty.

The problem of architecture is above everything visual. Le Corbusier stated that architecture is a matter of surfaces, masses, and voids. So it became necessary to consider form only in relation to itself and to its function so that it is the logical solution of a solidly founded problems. The problem is naturally a practical one. But to find its formal expression and its rational forms, the empirical data governing execution have to be reduced to a system. Le Corbusier intends his argument to be a social argument but he bases it on an abstract scheme, which necessarily obscures its historical awareness. He attempts to realize his reform for architectural taste within a framework or social reform, but when he thinks in utopian terms of an ideal civilization, instead of seeing it within the historical progression of society, he makes the same mistake as the Cubists.

The need for a history of the new architecture became apparent. Such a history had to sum up and justify in relation to a constant ideal goal the many-sided attempts at explaining the growth of this architecture in terms of discoveries in structural methods of the development of form, or of social and political change. It became evident that a history of architecture could not be reconstructed without taking into account the history of modern taste and that technical social or political considerations could find positive rather than polemical expression only by making form concrete.

Architectural Judgment

A renewal of architectural history can derive from a new consciousness of the problem of architecture which positivism allowed to decline. The principles of architectural judgment even if they always existed, did not have their scientific organization before the middle of the 18th century. Prior to that the principles of judgment were erratic because they confused aesthetic judgment either with logical or with moral judgment, or allowed it to disappear in mystical soaring or finally made it trivial in technical empiricism. Some of the recent architectural historians, with the aim of finding principles of judgment have turned to aesthetic heresies and arrived at good concrete judgment through an attempt at adjustment between principles and intuitions, one that was never completely realized. If the fault were not in the idea, it might be sought in the intuition.

The autonomy of architecture has been recognized and made to consist in a spiritual activity, a creative activity and not an imitative one, distinct from logical activity. To logical activity belongs the rational activity, as to architectures belong the imaginative or intuitive activity. The only reality of architecture is in the personality of the architect.

There exists the individuality of the architect. There are only practical schemes, and the idea and judgment must be identified. The quarrel of the classicists and moderns succeeded in liberating taste from critical intellectualism, from the hierarchy of kinds and from the tyranny of the antique. The affinity of taste and genius rejected the rules of architecture and denied eclecticism. All found the philosophical systematization in the idea of irrationality and primitivism of architecture. In that moment justness of critical judgment and clearness of the aesthetic idea coincided for the first time in history. In that time it took the name of neo-classicism which destroyed the creative freedom of modern architecture. The taste of the neo-classical period has conditioned the ideas of modern architecture. Every critic would agree when we affirm that architecture is the expression of feelings rather than concepts, because there is a distinction between architecture and science.

But the Romantic Movement, with the discovery of the primitives and the Middle Ages, freed minds from neo-classicism. There has never been a contrast between classics and romantics, but only between neo-classics and romantics. Ruskin understood Gothic architecture and that of the Italian primitives, because he was able to see in them the relationship between sensibility and morality against perfection, against choice from nature. Architecture was no longer the motive of rhetoric, nor of learned academic studies. It was a spiritual life lived in common by architects and critics. Every new motive of architecture assumed then the character of revolution, and from every revolution arose an interpretive myth.

Conclusion

The proof of the value of contemporary architecture experience always resides in dealing with the architecture of the past. So long as we refer to sources of information without transforming them in our thought there is no history without having transformed its present day life. The critical experience of present day architecture is necessary for the history of architecture.

Intuitive experience of architecture is not the architect's intuition, because it is not productive, because it does not comprehend the idea of architecture with which one judges. The architect has need of a present taste to direct his judgment even about past architecture and also should have intuitive experience of architecture in the past.

Architecture must include all the scientific, religious, moral and utilitarian motives which the architect has held in the moment of his creation and to which he has given form,

enriched with a complete humanity. The styles should have the character of historical relativity combined with the needs of everyday life but are distinguished from it by being abstractions rather than historical realities and are at most abstract aspects of those realities. It may be understood that the perspective background belongs to a civilization which pays more attention to the physical world.

The history of architecture is always has been a history of taste which is identified with art by force of genius. A work of architecture is perfect and absolute art. The history of art must fulfill two demands. One is the intuitive consciousness of art in the making, that is to say, contemporary art, and the other is the distinction of the absolute and the relative, the eternal and the momentary, the value which transcends history and the reality which is subject to it. Only he who possesses the most perfected taste which his civilization allows, can understand the tastes of the past civilizations or remote regions, whether around him or in the past, the absoluteness of architecture and the relativity of tastes.